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Sisyphus, crisis discourse, and the theory-practice gap in physical education:

A polemic

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Abstract

The constant and perennial plea by academics in the field to reform or change physical education share some similarities with the myth of Sisyphus from Greek mythology. Just as Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of endless frustration of rolling an enormous stone up a mountain as punishment for trying to be too clever, we argue that if the physical education profession continues down the path of more of the same unquestioned assumptions surrounding notions of change will be tantamount to being condemned like Sisyphus was to the torment of the stone. Part of the problem as we see it relates to insufficiently rigorous engagement with theory, and hence why we argue that physical education could benefit from a shift from a disproportionate focus on practice or practices to theory as a means to closing the gap between theory and practice. We do understand that our position may be uncontroversial to some; however, we equally understand that there will be many who will find our position controversial in the field. From our position, this has become an unavoidable problem due to the inherent way in which the relationship between theory and practice is understood differently by academics, teachers, and other actors in this context.

Keywords: physical education, educational theory, theory, practice, integration

Introduction

If an outsider was to undertake a precursory survey of contemporary academic literature and discourse from the field of physical education they would encounter a notable rise of postmodern and poststructuralist pieces of work that problematise the field of physical education. The common identifying feature of this work involves academics, teachers, and other actors in this context actively involved in either transforming the situation and/or solving a problem. Indeed, notions of problematising are ideological devices that are employed to subvert reasoned and rational argumentation (i.e. discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a position) because the intention is to abandon a certain viewpoint or position in favour of an alternative. This latter position is reinforced by Thorpe's (2003) critique, as it brings to our attention a more sinister issue than transforming a situation and/or solving a "problem" because the term "crisis" is frequently employed as an emotive mechanism to highlight the constant and perennial plea by academics in the field to reform or change physical education.¹ Compounding the issue further, a general lack of consensus concerning the *nature* or *aims* of physical education² has led to a view that the field is suffering from a crisis of legitimisation within education because:

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[o]ne of the driving influences and justifications of the “physical-education-in-crisis” discourse is based on the notion that due to the considerable disparity that exists between how physical education is practiced within educational institutions has led to the perception of a field that is a house divided amongst itself due to competing and rival traditions *about* physical education. (Stolz, 2014, pp. xvi–xvii)

From around the 1970s and 1980s onwards, physical education saw the rise of many sophisticated justifications for its inclusion as a school subject within the curriculum in the Anglophone (English speaking) world (see for example, Stolz, 2014); however, the ongoing prevalence of the physical education-in-crisis discourse is best described as a reform agenda that is masked as change for-the-sake-of-change that leads to an empty cul-de-sac.³ Indeed, we would argue that the reform or change agenda features prominently in both the contemporary academic literature and discourse in some form or another.⁴ For instance, Kirk’s (2010) *Physical Education Futures* reinforces this trend because his work tends to focus on the problems of physical education, and in turn, he argues that extinction might be possible without radical reform and change. More recently, the dominance of the reform agenda that is camouflaged as change for-the-sake-of-change that leads no-where was evident again in the Cagigal Keynote Lecture titled, “Physical Education and the art of teaching - transformative learning and teaching in physical education and sport pedagogy” delivered by Quennerstedt (2018) at the Association Internationale des Écoles Supérieures d’Éducation Physique World Congress. Not only did Quennerstedt start his lecture by problematising physical education by listing academic literature from the field to demonstrate what he perceived to be “problems” about physical education, his emphasising the need to “reclaim” the educational, the “E” within “PE” as a potential solution is of concern. After taking into consideration what we have already mentioned about the reform agenda masked as change for-the-sake-of-change is grounds in itself for some unease because of its vacuous nature, but maybe on a more fundamental level this lecture highlighted a noticeable gap between theory *and* practice that seems to highlight a worrying trend in contemporary physical education. We acknowledge that Quennerstedt was signposting the important role educational theory should play in the field of physical education, and that engagement with well-known historical and current theorists such as Dewey and Biesta was insufficient at this time. Indeed, we agree with Quennerstedt that educational theory should serve as a useful starting point when it comes to the “art of teaching” and “transforming learning and teaching”, nonetheless it remains the case that connections between theory and practice are not as advanced as they should be at this time.

With this in mind, our intention is to use this paper as a basis for raising some quite awkward questions, such as: Why is the default assumption found in the academic literature and/or discourse that there is a problem *with* the practices found *in* physical education? If there is a problem *with* physical education, what evidence and criteria exists to substantiate the

claims made about, say problem A, B, C, and so on? Why is there a general perception internally and externally that the field of physical education has failed to change and progress over time? When it comes to theory: Is there a noticeable *gap* between theory and practice in the field of physical education? If so, how could we identify, and address this gap? And, why is a *gap* between theory and practice a hindrance to change and progress? It is important to point out that we are highly cognisant that our position may be uncontroversial to some; however, we equally understand that there will be many who will find our position controversial for a range of reasons. In a sense, we challenge the latter to be open-minded enough to consider our position, and if still unconvinced, it would be reasonable to expect a reasoned account of why we may be wrong. As a result, in this paper we discuss two issues: firstly, we outline what we consider to be quite significant concerns that there has been an insufficiently rigorous and robust engagement with theory to date; and secondly, to overcome this deficit, we argue that physical education could benefit from a shift from a disproportionate focus on practice or practices to theory as a means to closing the gap between theory *and* practice.

Sisyphus, and polemical encounters of a critical/uncritical kind: more of the same unquestioned assumptions

The perennial plea by academics in the field to reform or change physical education share some similarities with the myth of Sisyphus from Greek mythology, particularly Homer's (1891) depiction of Sisyphus from Book XI of the *Odyssey*. Here, Sisyphus is condemned to a life of rolling an enormous stone up a mountain, and when it is about to reach the summit, a strong force drives it back to the bottom of the mountain plane again. It is at this point that Sisyphus would repeat the whole process of rolling the stone up to the top of the mountain in a ceaseless cycle of futile labour. Indeed, Sisyphus is condemned to an eternity of endless frustration as punishment for trying to be too clever in overcoming death. Although we acknowledge there exists a range of literary interpretations concerning the myth of Sisyphus; however, in this instance we are concerned with highlighting the semblances between physical education-in-crisis discourse and Sisyphus accomplishing nothing. Just as we can imagine Sisyphus straining with effort to raise the enormous stone up a mountain, combined with the despair of watching it roll back down to the mountain plane, and the realisation that he will have to push it up to the summit again afford us with a sobering metaphor of absurdity and torment. When we come to know the infinite cycle of absurdity and torment of Sisyphus' plight, the passion needed to raise the stone up the mountain seems futile, and ultimately misplaced when it is balanced against the torment of the return phase of never knowing when it will end. In one sense, this myth elucidates the tragedy of Sisyphus' plight when he becomes consciously aware that he cannot escape his fate, and hence discovers the absurdity of his predicament. In another sense,

physical education-in-crisis discourse is equally absurd because one can always find a burden, or a problem in physical education, and conclude that it is inevitable as the stone to the point that it becomes a torment to those who have been unknowingly condemned to endure the stone. Even though there is much to learn from the myth of Sisyphus – particularly in relation to the human condition – in this case our intention in this section is to highlight that the physical education-in-crisis discourse has been consciously and/or unconsciously created by academics, which in turn has set-up a situation where physical education both constitutes a form of torture, and fate belongs to them. As such, in this context we would argue that Sisyphus teaches us that we are stronger than the stone when we become conscious of our plight, and discover for ourselves that we can overcome the absurdity and torment of the stone, and break free by questioning many of the unquestioned assumptions that can be found in the name of physical education.

A useful starting point to highlight polemical encounters of a critical/uncritical kind found in the physical education literature is the use of Arnold's (1979a, 1979b, 1985, 1988) conceptual account of "about", "through", and "in" in curriculum documents. Indeed, our intention is to focus on the use of Arnold's conceptual account to demonstrate that there has been an insufficiently rigorous and robust engagement with theory to date.⁵ Although, Stolz & Thorburn (2017a) have raised some concerns about the use of Arnold's work recently, in this case we would like to extend on their critique to reinforce our position about a noticeable *gap* between theory and practice in the field of physical education. In their paper, the authors main aim is to provide a polemical piece of work of a *critical* kind by intentionally questioning many of the unquestioned assumptions found in Arnold's work, particularly the assumption that it is the "gold-standard" in physical education and sport pedagogy curriculum design (see for example, ACARA, 2012; QSA, 2004, 2010). What is interesting about this paper is the way in which the authors bring to our attention the way in which some academics *uncritically* take forward the work of others, and appear blinkered to the possibility that theory and practice might be better integrated *without* reference to Arnold at all.⁶ We would argue that this might have played a part in triggering unintended outcomes, one of which is that academics search for "silver bullets" that commit the folly of misreading original theorists, and of using previous research findings to suit their own arguments, or in most instances, taking ideas forward in ways that were never intended by the original author. As such, greater conceptual clarity on the subtle differences between contrasting versions of curriculum integration and interdisciplinary learning is pivotal to comprehending the extent to which physical education – particularly examination awards in physical education – can thrive within the experiences-and-outcomes curriculum frameworks that currently exist in many Anglophone countries (ACARA, 2015; NZMoE, 2016; Scottish Government, 2008).

In taking forward this position, we find it difficult to understand why Arnold's (1979a, 1979b, 1985, 1988) conceptual account of "about", "through", and "in" movement is continually put forward as the "gold standard", particularly when a brief review of the links between Arnold's conceptions of movement and practice in schools over the last thirty or so years has revealed variable gains at best. Part of the problem as we see it, relates to the way in which Arnold's ideas initially found their way into the curriculum in Australia (Stolz & Thorburn, 2017a). Interestingly, Kirk's (1988, p. 71) response to the "educational status problem" of physical education was to argue that Arnold's (1979a) framework "... may be useful for theorising the form and content of physical education in relation to its educational status in schools."⁷ Thereafter, almost the entirety of Chapter Four focuses on Arnold's three dimensions of movement, although some reference is made to the potential usefulness of "phenomenological philosophy" and "empirical sociology" in finding a "solution" to the educational status problem; however, within the context of the chapter there is fleeting acknowledgment of these possibilities before moving onto notions of "curriculum change". Unsurprisingly, Kirk (1988) concludes that Arnold's work could make a contribution to thinking about physical education programming, which in turn could inform the development of programmes that are of educational value. Kirk advanced this view at the same time he was Chair of the advisory committee taking forward examination developments in physical education in the mid 1980's in Queensland (Australia) (see for example, Stolz & Kirk, 2013; Stolz & Thorburn, 2017a). Unbeknown at the time, the impact of this theorising and resulting implementation of Arnold's work has led to a range of unforeseen and unintended consequences. This is evident through teachers concern over the pedagogical separation of theory and practice into "silos", conceptual confusion surrounding Arnold's conception of "about", "through", and "in", and a general sense that the affective richness of learning in physical education was somehow being compromised (Pill & Stolz, 2017).

Yet, given these multiple challenges, and the likelihood that achieving high stakes examination success will overtake these serious concerns, the default position would appear to be further engagement with Arnold's (1979a) three dimensions of movement. This is reinforced by Jones & Penney's (2018, p. 17) investigation of four teachers varied attempts to integrate theory and practice within a new senior school physical education course in Western Australia (Australia), and the conclusion they reached that further "... research with teachers that foregrounds Arnold's framework as a means of extending and strengthening the expression of 'integrated theory and practice' in physical education and proactively exploring the different pedagogic meanings that can be developed ..." is needed. Arguably, the mistake Jones & Penney (2018) make, is a continuing of *more of the same unquestioned assumptions* concerning Arnold's conceptual account, and a significant missed opportunity to realise that theory and practice can be integrated without reference to Arnold at all.

As a way forward, it might have been better if Kirk and/or other authors around this period had reviewed alternative ways in which the integration between theory and practice could plausibly lead to authentic learning and assessment gains for students in physical education.⁸ Progress at this time might have led to something more encouraging than the ongoing finessing of Arnold's (1979a) conceptual account of "about", "through", and "in". Certainly, we would argue that not enough attention has been paid to the unquestioned assumptions found in notions of curriculum integration, particularly in relation to the nature of knowledge. Pring (1971) reminds us that by questioning the notion of curriculum integration, we can gain a greater sense of what "integration" means as a concept in education. By exploring the epistemological implications of curriculum integration, Pring (1971) clarifies the concept of integration through four theses: (1) the "strong" thesis that is based on the unity of all knowledge; (2) the "weak" thesis that is based on the unity of knowledge within broad fields of experience; (3) the "enquiry" thesis that is concerned with problem-solving as a method; and, (4) the interrelationship of disciplines. In this case, it is worth heeding the strong point made by Pring that integration builds on the idea that knowledge can be unified, and that the main aim of integration concerns knowledge being unified within certain broad fields of experience. Accordingly, the nature and integration of knowledge requires accommodating and assimilating new holistic experiences in shared social contexts relative to recognising to a greater degree the disciplinary status of subjects.

On this basis, it is not too hard to find a trend in the physical education literature and associated curriculum frameworks that have shifted their focus onto notions of meaningful experiences; however, these views would appear to be informed by a number of *uncritical assumptions* about the theoretical nature of knowledge that is covertly embedded within the rhetoric of the learner or students constructing their own meaning. The assumption here being that all experiences are the same, all experiences are meaningful, and that all human agents create their own meaning or meaningful experiences in the same way (see for example, Beni et al, 2017). Not only does such a position represent another example of uncritical assumptions, but it highlights a one-sided theoretical and psychological understanding of embodiment that is controversial and not shared by many scholars from the discipline area of psychology (see for example, Brown et al, 2011). Furthermore, it also brings to our attention how physical education seems to have difficulty thus far in understanding and researching the embodied character or nature of experience, which seems rather odd when you take into consideration the central role of the body in physical education.

While the appeal of Arnold's ideas might be that it could readily be considered in physical education contexts, the problem might be that the framework itself introduces a secondary step between educational theory and policy guidelines which is *not* necessary. And now that we are much more used to having policy guidelines and engaging with them during

implementation, it may be better to miss out Arnold's secondary conceptual step altogether, and consider the links between educational theory and physical education guidelines in clearer and more exact and fruitful ways. Clearly, there is a need for more *robust* and *rigorous* contemporary educational theorising to shape and inform developments in physical education. As we stated earlier, we find it hard to understand why Arnold's work continues to be put forward in physical education when we already know how difficult it is to understand and implement. As a result, if the physical education profession continues down the path of more of the same unquestioned assumptions, we would argue quite strongly that it is tantamount to being condemned like Sisyphus was to the absurdity and torment of the stone.

It is worth noting that Pope (2014), in a related field, seems to be one of the few who shares our concern that the field is sufficiently engaging with theoretical concerns that are capable of highlighting learning priorities and methods of learning integration. In this regard, Pope (2014, p. 961) is critical of the over attention directed towards social theorists, such as Foucault and Bourdieu while noting that if "... learning plays such a crucial role within our research umbra, where are the studies and publications framed around the works of Dewey, Bruner or Vygotsky?". Furthermore, when the physical education profession has engaged with theory, it has frequently been endlessly to do with addressing social justice issues, such as gender, inclusion, and so on that take their lead from authors, like Foucault, Bourdieu, and so on. It is important to emphasise that we consider these issues important; however, our point is to highlight how postmodern and poststructuralist theories have been employed to problematise an issue for the purposes of either transforming a situation and/or leading to positive change. While some may see gains from this, the situation is nevertheless that this form of theorising is more to do with raising awareness than it is to do with fundamental matters of improving conceptual coherence between theory and practice.

Theory as research: closing the gap between theory and practice

In this section, we would like to extend on Roberts' (2018) chapter titled, "Theory as Research" found in *Theory and Philosophy in Education Research* (Quay et al., 2018). We are cognisant that Roberts' (2018) uses the terms "theory" and "philosophy" interchangeably in his chapter; however, our usage in this paper will be limited to the former usage, and extend to the term "educational theory" where it is appropriate to do so. As for the latter, we are fully aware of the contribution philosophy can make in education and educational research (see for example, Stolz & Ozolins, 2018). Likewise, we acknowledge that there is a range of different types of theories which education can call on, such as social theory, psychological theory, political theory, and so on, which is just as important, but our point is to emphasise that educational theory draws from a variety of discipline areas to guide and inform practice or practices, and hence why it is not autonomous in character. In one sense, this highlights the complexity of

theory because it is not easily describable in character. In another sense, this complexity may account for why there is much misunderstanding of its nature. We also want to emphasise that our intention is not to argue that theory should be given superior status over practice, or vice versa, that practice should be privileged over theory. To do so would widen the gap between theory and practice even further. Rather, we agree with Roberts (2018) that we need to shift the focus from “theory *and* research”, or “theory” and “practice” to “*theory* as research” in educational research in order to close the gap between theory and practice. In particular, we would like to challenge what we perceive to be as a widely-held assumption found in physical education that theory is preparatory to, or secondary to gathering and analysing data. Such an attitude has led to an odd type of compartmentalisation that misconstrues the nature of knowledge in educational research into unhelpful categories, but more importantly it privileges notions of “data” that is connected with the taken-for-granted idea of “the given” that is deeply problematic (Standish, 2001). This is further reinforced by Roberts’ (2018, pp. 23–24) when he states:

To work with theory, it seems, is somehow not “real” research. Acknowledgment may be made of the importance of a well-developed theoretical framework in informing the methodology of an investigation or in analysing data, but engaging and applying theory in this manner is often distinguished from, and accorded a different status than, the “research itself”.

In order to make the shift from “theory *and* research”, to “*theory* as research” is not just a matter of language, but more a case of questioning who we are as researchers and examining why we value and privilege certain methodologies over other methodologies, how we understand research, and as a result, come to the realisation that we need to broaden our understanding of research (see for example, Suissa, 2007). Indeed, we would argue that physical education as a profession, and in some respects, contemporary academic literature and discourse seems to disproportionately focus on practice or practices in the theory-practice relationship. An obvious contemporary example of this disproportionate focus on practice in physical education can be found in the popularised approach found under the umbrella term of “models-based practice” or “MBP” (see for example, Casey, 2014; Casey & MacPhail, 2018). Likewise, anecdotally we have lost count of how many times we have heard the colloquial expressions, “There was too much theory in X”, or “There was not enough practice in Y”, either at professional development programmes, and/or conferences for both physical education teachers and academics. Not only does this demonstrate a disillusionment with theory or theorising in a sustained and rigorous fashion, it highlights a general lack of understanding relating to the nature of knowledge that is disconcerting. In a sense, both colloquial expressions elucidate a significant failure by the individuals who made them because they lacked the capacity to ask persistent questions about the relationship of theory to practice,

and in turn to learn from their attempts to find answers to their questions. In saying this, disillusionment with theorising, let alone educational theorising in any recognisable form would appear to be widespread in both our contemporary academic culture and the teaching profession to the point that theoretical discussion surrounding the relationship of theory to practice is barren and unhelpful (Carr, 1980, 1986, 1987).⁹ To adopt such a view is to miss the point that theory or educational theory can inform and improve practice or practices, and may actually help physical education deal with certain perplexities.

It is important to emphasise that by questioning the role of theory here does not commit us to a narrow conception of physical education or education. To the contrary, we see theory or educational theory concerned with determining rationally defensible principles that can inform practice or practices in such a way that these judgments become an abiding disposition (see for example, Hirst, 1963, 1966, 1973, 1983). In touching on educational matters to spell out the full implications for physical education, much can be gained from a solid understanding of the diverse senses of theory, particularly its practical relevance in education (Carr, 2000, 2001, 2003). In discussing the complex relationship of theory and practice in an educational context, Carr (2003) brings to our attention two useful senses of educational theory. In the first sense, educational theory is mainly concerned with what we should rationally *believe* from the point of view of logic or evidence, say in relation to human learning, educational policy, pedagogical practice, and so on. Whereas, the second sense of educational theory is concerned with a *normative* dimension of what we should rationally do, say in relation to human learning, educational policy, pedagogical practice, and so on. Carr (2003, p. 57) makes his position clear, that when academic theory is mainly concerned with:

... the discovery of *truth*, it is also genuine theory, whereas normative inquiry or speculation – concerned as it is more with what is *good* or worthwhile rather than true – is less evidently (or strictly speaking) any form of theory at all.

Although, notions of truth may be an open question with many diverse perspectives, the key point here being that educational theory draws from a range of discipline areas to make practical judgments about what ought to be, and what ought not to be done in the name of educational practice, particularly in response specific educational questions, problems, issues, and so on that may arise. Our reading of the present state of affairs in physical education seems to demonstrate a disproportionate focus on practice or practices, and a general dissatisfaction with notions of theory or educational theory that employs discipline-based approaches in the service of some educational problem. Of course, the irony is not lost on us that more theory, or a theoretical solution to the noticeable gap between theory and practice will somehow resolve the issue, particularly when in most instances it is the very problem itself. In addressing this issue, it is worth considering some of the assumptions that are at play. One of the most common complaints levelled against educational theory that accounts for the gap between theory and

practice can be attributed to the way in which abstract ideas and principles fail to be relevant in concrete situations that teachers face on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, this “gap” between theory and practice emerges from methodological assumptions concerning the relationship of theory *to* practice. This criticism misconstrues educational theory with the production of empirically established findings that privileges a scientific approach to solving problems in an accurate way with certain degree of precision. Not only has there been a significant shift away from academic disciplines like philosophy to discipline areas that predominantly employ empirical data-collecting methods to solving these “problems” within the classroom, such as the use of psychometrics found in psychology. As a result, it is important to point out that educational theory was never meant to predict and/or explain educational problems with scientific precision and accuracy, but was rather concerned with determining rationally defensible principles that can inform practice or practices in a systematic and rigorous manner (Hirst, 1963, 1966, 1973, 1983).

In terms of closing the gap between theory and practice, it is important to realise that although education may be recognised as a practical activity, it is grounded in educational concepts, such as “learning”, “growth”, “experience”, “engagement”, and so on, by functioning as guiding theories in educational practice. Undeniably, the close relationship between theory and practice becomes noticeable when a method becomes ineffective, or fails. In response to a practice found wanting, or is inadequate for its stated purpose normally triggers an increase in theoretical investigation that inevitably leads to modifications to the practice or practices so that satisfactory progress and success can be achieved. Of course, the catch here to success relates to closing the gap between theory and practice so that the rational principles that inform the practice or practices are consistent with the conceptual framework that drives the activity in question. In this case, it is worth heeding W. Carr’s (1980, p. 66) argument that educational theory’s main role is to:

... emancipate practitioners from their dependence on practices that are the product of precedent, habit and tradition by developing modes of analysis and enquiry that are aimed at exposing and examining beliefs, values and assumptions implicit in the theoretical framework through which practitioners organise their experiences.

In a sense, we have extended on W. Carr’s call to challenge some unquestioned assumptions found in the name of physical education in this paper; however, what is distinctive about the theory or educational theory being envisaged stems from an understanding that it is only through practice that we can determine the value and success of an educational theory. We understand that our position may be uncontroversial to some; however, we equally understand that there will be many who will find our position controversial in the field of physical education, particularly when the gap between theory and practice is noticeably wide at times. From our point of view, this has become an unavoidable problem in the field of physical

education due to the inherent way in which the relationship between theory and practice is understood differently by academics, teachers, and so on (see for example, Stolz & Pill, 2016a, 2016b). Hence why the most appropriate way to understand educational theory is to view it as a species of practical knowledge (Carr, 2005; Stolz, 2013, 2014).

Furthermore, there is historical evidence that closing the relationship between theory and practice is possible, and has been tried with success in physical education. For example, Thorburn (2018) explored how the New Physical Education plan in the United States of America in the late 1920s contained extended references to the work of John Dewey to help broaden the scope of physical education in educational practice and to exemplify how the closer integration of physical, intellectual and moral learning could dovetail with the growth of democratic ideals and new industrial life. While it may be that the case that this example of theory and practice integration lacks the extended evaluation evidence that might be part of education nowadays, (e.g., in the form of measurements of students quality of learning experience and record of attainment levels achieved) it stands nevertheless as a plausible example of where physical education has tried to make rational practice gains.

Conclusion

In this paper, we started out by highlighting how the contemporary academic literature and discourse of physical education seems to assume that there is a problem *with* the practices found *in* the field of physical education. In order to highlight the fixation of physical education-in-crisis discourse, we argued that there are some similarities with the myth of Sisyphus from Greek mythology. To highlight our point, we reviewed Arnold's work on the integrated possibilities of his three dimensions of movement framework of "about", "through", and "in" found in various curriculum frameworks. In this case, we questioned some of the assumptions that underpin this work, and in turn criticised some of the research and policy arrangements that continue to endorse this work, particularly when it is well-known that this work causes conceptual confusion, and other associated problems. In raising the way in which some academics uncritically take forward the work of others and re-emphasise certain points in an *ad hoc* way is deeply problematic, particularly when work is taken forward in ways never intended by the original author. In a sense, our review demonstrated an inability to understand the close relationship between theory and practice, but maybe more poignantly a failure to realise that theory and practice can be integrated without reference to Arnold at all. This is why we argued that if the physical education profession continues down the path of more of the same unquestioned assumptions, we would argue quite strongly that it is tantamount to being condemned like Sisyphus was to the absurdity and torment of the stone.

In order to overcome this deficit, we argued that physical education could benefit from a shift from a disproportionate focus on practice or practices to theory as a means to closing the gap between theory and practice. To bring this about, we argued that "*theory as research*"

can help close the gap between theory and practice found in the physical education profession because theory or educational theory is concerned with determining rationally defensible principles that can inform practice or practices in such a way that these judgments become an abiding disposition. Rather than view theory and educational theory as the cause of the “gap” between theory and practice, we examined why we value and privilege certain methodologies over others, and challenged the assumption that theory and educational theory is irrelevant to educational practice. We argue that to successfully close the gap between theory and practice stems from an understanding that it is only through practice that we can determine the value and success of an educational theory. Without a doubt, the relationship between theory and practice becomes noticeable when a method becomes ineffective, or fails because it normally triggers an increase in theoretical investigation that inevitably leads to modifications to the practice or practices so that satisfactory progress and success can be achieved. From our point of view, this has become an unavoidable problem in the field of physical education given the fractured relationship between theory and practice at present.

Notes

1. Recently, this notion of “crisis” has been critically discussed by Stolz (2014) and Stolz & Kirk (2015a, 2015b) as *physical education-in-crisis discourse*.
2. For some recent works on this theme, see the following: “David Kirk on physical education and sport pedagogy: In dialogue with Steven Stolz” (Stolz & Kirk, 2015a, 2015b), “Aims and values in physical education: Can rival traditions of physical education ever be resolved?” (Stolz & Thorburn, 2017b), and “Past, present, and possible futures” (Stolz, 2017). Some may argue that the *nature* or *aims* of physical education may not be relevant, or even possible when it comes to educational practice. Although, this may be the case when it comes to notions of consensus around the nature or aims of any educational practice, our point does not relate to consensus building, and more a case of highlighting the diverse array of plural aims that are claimed to be covered by the curriculum area of physical education in most English speaking countries. In this case, our concern has more to do with whether physical education actually fulfils all, or some of these claimed aims in any meaningful educational way, and if so, what evidence is being generated to demonstrate that they are being fulfilled educationally. Even though interesting, it is not possible to fully expand on this line of thought in this paper due to space restrictions.
3. It is worth noting Lawson’s (1984) paper titled, “Problem-Setting for Physical Education and Sport” within this context because he uses the term “problem setting” to highlight how a profession (i.e. physical education) goes about defining a problem as a means to providing a solution to a said problem (i.e. “problem-solving”). Interestingly, Lawson makes it clear that physical education professionals who work in the academy should be more “reflective” and “reflexive” in their work because “problem-setting” is not value neutral (e.g. “framing” and “naming”). In a way, this reflects the internal dynamics of a profession that may lead to negative or positive consequences depending on the perception of those who are on the “inside” or “outside” of the profession in relation to whether the proposed solution has actually worked or not. Indeed, it could be argued that physical education-in-crisis discourse is a contemporary version of “problem-setting”; however, it is more sophisticated in the way it attempts to legitimise a marginalised profession by proposing potential solutions to so-called “problems” considered important by Western culture. An obvious example is the notable response from the physical education profession in relation to the so-called “obesity crisis”. For some papers that quite rightly question the response by the physical education profession, see the following: “Physical Education and Health: A Polemic or ‘let them eat cake!’” (Evans, 2003), “The ‘obesity crisis’ and school physical education” (Kirk, 2006), and “‘I don’t read fiction’: academic discourse and the relationship between health and physical education” (Tinning, 2015).
4. Please note we will intentionally refer to some of the literature found in Quennerstedt’s Cagigal lecture relating to physical education-in-crisis discourse. This being as follows: *Critical Inquiry and Problem-Solving in Physical Education* (Wright et al., 2004), *Physical Education, Curriculum and Culture: Critical Issues in the Contemporary Crisis* (Tinning, 2006), “Curriculum: Forming and Reshaping the Vision of Physical Education in a High Need, Low Demand World of Schools” (Ennis, 2006), *Pedagogy and Human Movement* (Tinning, 2010), and *Redesigning Physical Education* (Lawson, 2018).
5. We have intentionally used Arnold’s conceptual account of “about”, “through”, and “in” movement to highlight how the contemporary literature demonstrates that there are concerns with its application –

particularly by teachers in schools –, and yet, it continues to be put forward by some academics to be the “gold-standard” in physical education and sport pedagogy curriculum design. To us, this reinforces our point that theory in physical education seems to be taken forward “uncritically”, and hence is tantamount to a form of torture in the same way Sisyphus was condemned to the torment of the stone. As such, it is hard to draw any other conclusion when some academics continue to uncritically take forward the work of others and re-emphasise certain points in ways never intended by the original author or authors.

6. For some examples, see the following: “A vision lost? (Re)articulating an Arnoldian conception of education ‘in’ movement in physical education” (Brown, 2013a), “‘In, through and about’ movement: is there a place for the Arnoldian dimensions in the new Australian Curriculum for Health and Physical Education?” (Brown, 2013b), “Interpretation and enactment of Senior Secondary Physical Education: pedagogic realities and the expression of Arnoldian dimensions of movement” (Brown & Penney, 2017), and “Investigating the ‘integration of theory and practice’ in examination physical education” (Jones & Penney, 2018).
7. We refer to Kirk’s work titled, *Physical Education and Curriculum Study* from 1988 because of its historically significant position. Indeed, this work served as the catalyst of introducing Arnold’s work in Australia where it subsequently found its way into school curriculum documents. The dominance of Arnold’s work is hard to quantify and qualify accurately; however, it could be argued that the prevalence of academic work that specifically advocates for Arnold’s work may be the best way of highlighting its significance, particularly in Australia (e.g. see endnote #6 above).
8. We specifically make reference to the conception of “integration” because we would argue that the integration of theory and practice may provide some noticeable gains in physical education. In particular, Pring’s (1971) paper provides an excellent theoretical foundation of the educational practice known as “curriculum integration”. This is not to say that “integration” is *the* solution, but more a case of alluding to both the possibilities and complexities of this educational practice.
9. It would be a mistake to view these works referred to here, and other works referred to in this section as being dated in some way by the period in which they were published. To do so is to fail to understand that work that is concerned with conceptual clarity and coherence is timeless, and hence should not be viewed as dated.

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